

COMMENTARY

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Conflicting Views of Islam Spill onto the Soccer Pitch

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When Sarah Samir stepped this week on to an Egyptian soccer pitch to referee a men's match, she joined a small band of Arab women referees staking out their right to be involved in the sport on par with men. The significance of Samir's appearance highlighted the battle for the soul of Islam that is being fought on the pitch as much as it is being waged on multiple other fronts. It also spotlighted strategies to counter militant ideologies.

Samir, the first Egyptian woman referee, arbitrated a third division match between Wadi Degla FC and Talaea El Gaish SC. She did so as a Syrian activist group reported that Islamic State, the jihadist group that controls a swath of Syria and Iraq, executed 13 teenage boys for watching on television an Asian Cup soccer match in Iraq's Al-Yarmouk district near the city of Mosul. It also followed a warning by the Iranian football federation to members of its national team competing in the tournament in Australia not to take selfies with female Australian Iranian fans, most of whom do not conform to Islamic dress that hides the contours of the body.

The juxtaposition of the three events highlights a long-standing struggle among ulema or Muslim scholars and within the jihadist world about the role and place of soccer in Islam. It is a multi-layered debate with opinions running the gamut from condemnation of the sport as an infidel invention that detracts believers from their religious obligations to clerics who view soccer exclusively as a men's sport to a jihadist divide between those who see football's utility as a bonding and recruitment tool and groups that see it as a violation of Islamic law punishable by death.

With Samir's appearance on the pitch, Egypt joined a small number of Middle Eastern and North African nations – the United Arab Emirates, Syria, Morocco, Tunisia and Israel – that allows Muslim women to referee soccer matches. Her appointment to referee a match came three weeks after Egyptian general-turned-president Abdel Fattah Al Sisi called for a reform of Islam.

In doing so, Egypt was adhering to a 2012 resolution putting women's sporting rights on par with that of men of the West Asian Football Federation (WAFF). It did so despite the fact that Egypt is an African country that falls beyond the authority of the WAFF that groups Middle Eastern soccer bodies in Asia.

Responses on social media to Samir reflected public debate in the Middle East and North Africa that by and large appears in majority to favour women's sporting rights. NguZsc tweeted: "Sarah Samir is a great thing for our country. We are moving forward." AhmeD_FeFela congratulated her. Ahmednhad's praise more likely than not confirmed one of conservative ulema and jihadist objections to women's soccer and the mixing of genders on the pitch: male celebration of women as women. "Honestly she is fit and beautiful ... Why aren't all Egyptian referees like her?" Ahmednhad tweeted.

The significance of the breaking of the mould by Samir and her fellow women referees goes far beyond the soccer pitch. It goes to the core of the ideological struggle within Islam and efforts to counter the appeal of jihadist groups like Islamic State who in the view of Eli Berman, a former member of the Israeli military's elite Golani brigade-turned-University of California economist, constitute economic clubs whose sustainability depends on their ability to create a mutual aid environment that caters to the spiritual and material needs of their dependent members and brutal repression of women and dissenters.

The killing of the 13 boys who were watching a match between Jordan and Iraq fits the mould. The Syrian activist group, Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently, a reference to the Syrian city of Raqqa where Islamic State has based itself, reported that the boys were publicly executed by firing squad in a sports arena. Loudspeakers reportedly announced that their execution was intended as a message to those who violate the strict laws of the Islamic State, which ordered that their bodies be left in the facility for all to see. "The bodies remained lying in the open and their parents were unable to withdraw them for fear of murder by terrorist organization," the activists said.

Promotion of women's sporting rights, including the fielding of female referees, fits Berman's counterterrorism strategy articulated in a book in 2011 entitled *New Economics of Terrorism*. Berman argued that what made the difference between viable and non-viable militant groups was not religious fervour but the provision of jobs and social services, including education, health, sports and enforcement of law and order.

In Berman's cost-benefit analysis, the cost of hardening targets and defending them against militant attacks is far higher than the cost of weakening militant economic clubs by offering their members alternatives. "Concentrating on capturing or killing every last terrorist (or buying off some warlord to do so) can probably only succeed in the short run, since the underlying conditions of weak governance and/or weak service provision will likely continue to generate new terrorist clubs," Berman wrote.

Berman's strategy has particular relevance for Middle East and North Africa nations as well as governments and Muslim communities in Europe in the wake of the flow of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq and the recent attacks in Paris on a satirical magazine and a Jewish supermarket. Many frustrated, disaffected youth in the Middle East and North Africa as well as in Europe feel they are deprived of opportunity and gravitate toward jihadist Islam as their only perceived option,

Berman's strategy is one that boldly challenges existing political and social structures that encourage that perception. It holds out the prospect of ensuring that the disaffected gain a stake in their societies rather than feel that opting for radical alternatives is the only way of getting their voices heard and their grievances addressed.

Note: This article was originally published in the blog, **The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer** and has been reproduced with the author's permission. Web link: <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.in/2015/01/conflicting-views-of-islam-spill-onto.html>

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